

GIVE IT ALL

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Mark 10:17-27

"...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor... then come, follow me." -Mark 10:21 (NRSV)

I should like to bring to our discussion of this familiar and important story - the story of a wealthy young man who came to Jesus looking for eternal life, was told to sell everything he had, give it all away and come follow, and who went away sad. A popular social critic and philosopher. Her name is Erma Bombeck and one of the best columns she ever wrote was: "What's saved is often lost." Someone was kind enough to clip and send it to me and I

have been saving it for this occasion.

Erma Bombeck wrote:

"Someone interviewed me recently and wanted to know if I saved ideas so that I could be assured of at least one strong column a week.

"I don't save anything. My pockets are empty at the end of a week. So is my gas tank. So is my file of ideas. I trot out the best I've got, and come the next week, I bargain, whimper, make promises, cower and throw myself on the mercy of the Almighty for just three more columns in exchange for cleaning my oven.

"I didn't get to this point overnight. I came from a family of savers who were sired by poverty and raised in the Depression and who worshiped at the altar of self-denial.

"Throughout the years, I've seen a fair number of my family who have died leaving candles that have never been lit, appliances that never got out of the box and new sofas shrouded in chenille bedspreads.

"It gets to be a habit. After a while, you have dreams you hide away for the days when you have time. You have compliments to say to people that you put aside until the right moment. You squirrel away plans to take a trip when all of you can get away. You have grudges you are going to settle when you get around to it.

"I have learned that silverware tarnishes when it isn't used, perfume turns to alcohol, candles melt in the attic over the summer, and ideas that are saved for a dry week often become dated.

"I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will be like this: 'So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life? Any dreams that were unfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around?'

"And, I will answer, 'I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born.'"

I don;t know whether Erma Bombeck had Mark 10:17-27 in mind when she wrote that but it sounds as if she knows the story.

He is, I think, one of the most authentic characters in the New Testament. I know this young man - this first century Young Urban Professional from Jerusalem. He shows up in each of the Synoptic Gospels, but, quips Barbara Brown Taylor, "Most of us wish he had never shown up at all. Because of him we have one of the hardest sayings in the whole Bible; one that strikes fear in the hearts of would-be-Christians anywhere." [The Preaching Life, p. 121]

**I know this young man. He's hard working, successful, responsible, volunteers some in his spare time and he's doing well, very well financially. But there is something missing in his life, an empty restlessness, something T. S. Eliot once described -----
Something St. Augustine meant when he**

wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee."

And so one day he comes to see a man everybody is talking about, Jesus - from Nazareth, a rabbi, a teacher of wisdom, a healer and miracle worker who, at the moment, is on his way to Jerusalem with his group of followers, to observe Passover. What a moment when the young man runs up to Jesus, kneels before him and asks, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" What follows is intriguing: "Obey the law," Jesus says; "keep the commandments."

"I do that" the young man answers. "I've been keeping the commandments all my life and I'm still empty."

Jesus likes that, looks at him and loves him, the text says. This man's wholesome innocence, honest inquisitiveness, courageous vulnerability, make him a very winsome character. He has all the promise of a truly great one. So, why doesn't he feel good about himself? He has it all. Even his religion assures him: his wealth is evidence of God's blessing. Jesus looks at him again, loves him and says, "You lack one thing. Go, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, come follow me."

Jesus doesn't say that to everybody by the way. It is his prescription for a particular young man who, when he hears it, is sad, the text says. Appalled is more like it, don't you imagine? Sell it all - give it all? Who could do a thing like that? Maybe some of it; maybe make a major, leadership gift to the campaign; maybe even tithe ten percent of the income from his investments, after taxes, of course. But sell it all? Give it all? No way.

Barbara Brown Taylor says Christians mangle this text in one of two ways: By denying that it is about money and by thinking it is only about money.

It is, first of all about money. Jesus, by the way, has a lot to say about the topic. Someone observed that he talks more about money than he does about heaven. Someone else has said that if you want to know what a man or woman really believes, don't listen to the creeds he/she affirms in church: look at the check status.

This is about money, a topic about which Americans and American Christians particularly, have a great deal of ambiguity. Two recent books explain the topic. Jacob Needleman is a professor of philosophy at San Francisco State University and he has written a book entitled Money and the Meaning of Life which has received national attention. He writes:

"In no other culture or civilization that we know of has money been such a pervasive and decisive influence. In the world we now live in, money enters into everything human beings do, into every aspect and pocket of life. This is something new." [p. 2]

And I thought of the unfortunate place we have come to politically: that the prerequisite for mounting a successful political campaign is the ability to raise and spend an enormous amount of money: you're one if you have it, or contributors who believe in you - and who expect that you will remember their interests when you win and take office. I thought about how money dictates decisions in hard mineral mining rights for Western ----- and the gun lobby in Texas, and the fabulously wealthy Christian Coalition in Virginia and Harry and Louise on health care reform and the eloquent fact that campaign reform promised, discussed, debated was at the very last minute filibustered to death. Needleman is dead right. "Nowhere else in the world - or in history - does money have that kind of influence."

"We live in an affluent society" he cites. This means not only that we have much material wealth, but that we want this wealth more than we want everything else." [p. 22] But, says this professor of philosophy, it doesn't do for us, what we want. It doesn't make us happy or free or immortal or even content. In fact, he proposes that our desire for money is a kind of self-imposed hell. In a chapter entitled, "The New Poverty: Life in Hell," he writes about the first part of Dante's Divine Comedy, when the author descends into hell and begins to feel pity for the people he sees there, writhing in pain. "But his guide, the great poet Virgil, admonishes him. Do not feel pity, Virgil tells him. They are getting exactly what they want. Hell is the state in which we are barred from

recovering what we truly need because of the value we give to what we merely want." [p. 27]

Robert Wuthnow, a Princeton sociologist, agrees. Wuthnow has become an expert on the topic of how Americans, including American church people, express their values by their use of their money. In his recent book, God and Mammon in America, he observes that we are a deeply religious people, "But we are also passionately committed to the almighty dollar. We devote the bulk of our waking hours to earning it and much of the rest of our time finding ways to spend it. In our more candid moments, we admit to being thoroughly materialistic (while deploring this trait in our children). We believe in the proverbial bottom line, shoulder greater and greater personal obligations, and

fret about how to pay our bills. These are, we tell ourselves, matters of sheer necessity. But they also enlist our hearts and minds." [p. 2]

Sell it all. Give it all. It's a kind of ultimate counter culture mandate, is it not? What would happen if we all did it? What about our obligations, our bills, our responsibility to our families and communities and colleges and museums? Or is this Jesus' prescription for this young man alone? What would his prescription be for you and me? What would he tell you and me that we need to do to inherit eternal life or to be fully and completely alive now? Would it not be different for each of us? Would he not, with his mysterious precision, his sense of the center, would he not identify whatever it is in which you and I have invested our hopes and dreams, and are counting on to save us; our career, our success, our influence, our power, our personal appearance? Would he not tell us what he told that winsome

young man, namely to release our grip, to open our hands to let it go and to come, follow.

Robert Wuthnow scolds the mainline Christian Church for not wrestling with this issue. "When it comes to money," Wuthnow says, "churches take the path of least resistance - "seldom rocking the boat, seldom disrupting the flow of charitable giving. In the process religious leaders have nevertheless given away much of their birthright." [p. 9]

Wuthnow, whose specialty is opinion research, says Americans are asking basic questions of meaning and purpose, perhaps as never before. And he thinks the churches are failing them precisely because of ambiguity and lack of nerve. Jesus didn't ask for a modest contribution to the cause: he apparently

wanted this man's heart and soul. It's a long way, Wuthnow cracks, between the kind of pathetic pleading that goes on in churches over a percentage point increase in pledge commitments and Jesus' invitation to take up your cross and follow.

We are caught in this dilemma. We are not a tight band of twelve or twenty deeply committed persons. We are a public church in the Culture of Disbelief and we are theologically diverse and we attempt to be home for the passionately devoted, the mildly interested, the curious, the seeker. And it would be wrong, I think to respond to the person asking, perhaps for the first time, about God and the meaning of life, by suggesting that he start the process by making a financial pledge. And yet, is not part of the crisis of religion in our culture precisely our ambiguity about this matter of sacrifice and commitment; our indication to present the Gospel of Christ as a set of opinions, not much different from other opinions, a perspective for considerations, and the mission of the church as a set of

modestly helpful activities, rather than a faithful representative of one who said - Sell it all - Give it all?

The result of our ambiguity is something called "Consumer Religion," religion designed with the customer in mind. First you study the target market, design a product to meet what your market has said it wants and will pay for, and then program it: boutique religion, something for everyone, with child care for all, and plenty of parking - at least that's not a temptation - or even a remote possibility for us!

One of Wuthnow's interviews illustrates Lindsey, divorced mother of two, goes to church, but doesn't make much sense of the idea of giving money to the church. And that's understandable. In her situation, the best stewardship is to use as much as she can, all of it, to provide for and secure her family. But she was candid enough to tell the interviewer that she was mostly interested in spirituality that made her feel good about herself. Her religion doesn't tell her how to make decisions - about work or money - but they help relieve some of the anxiety she experiences in making these decisions." [p. 18]

What we have cultivated in this culture, says Tom Long of Princeton, is a kind of bland liberalism, long on tolerance, short on loyalty, channel surfing across the religious spectrum of the United States, selecting those options that match their life-styles and meet their personal wants." [Theology Today, July 94, p. 199]

The wealthy young man who came to Jesus asking about life in a way, I think, represents everyone of us. He has succeeded professionally, financially. In addition, he has been successful religiously. He has done everything his religion told him to do all his life. He is at the end of the line... he doesn't know what else to do to produce the experience he wants. And what is that? - satisfaction, wholeness, oneness

**with the world, with his own life, with
God?**

The radical message of Christian faith is that what we truly need is offered to us as a gift... God's love, God's forgiveness, God's acceptance.

The radical personal implication, of course, is that you have to be able to accept the gift in order to receive it. I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor puts it: "You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hand to take it with. You cannot make room for it if your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are free to go." [op. cit., p. 125]

And so, what we have here is the possibility of a very different way of living life and relating to our resources. What we have here is a whole new way of living which is intentionally unattached to the way things the culture says are absolutely "must haves" in order to live.

On occasion I am asked to talk to people about preaching, sometimes to try to teach it to seminary students. And one of the questions that always comes up, particularly from veteran ministers, is about saving good ideas... not unlike the subject of Erma Bombeck's essay. I confess, I used to be a "saver." Sometimes in the process of preparing a sermon, I'd have a couple of ideas that I thought were so good I shouldn't waste them in August when they might work in November. And then I was reading Annie Dillard's wonderful little book, The Writing Life, which is really about living life. Annie Dillard's words leapt off the page and I always read them to students who ask about saving material for a later sermon and I have come to think that they are perhaps the most eloquent community

around on the story of the wealthy young man in Mark 10.

Bear with me for one more extended quotation. Annie Dillard advises:

"One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later time in the book, or for another book: give it, give it all, give it now. The impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it all. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful, it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You

**open your safe and find ashes." [p.
78/79]**

This is not an easy lesson for many of us. If you are on the short side of forty-five, your life script is earn, consume, discard. If you are on the far side of forty-five or fifty, you were formed by the experience of the Great Depression and at least one of your life scripts is earn, save, hoard, save. You may even have done something as peculiar as this. When I was finally able to afford an automobile that was reliable and actually started every time I wanted it to, I purchased a brand new Chevrolet. And then I did something very significant. I purchased, from the dealer, a set of clear plastic seat covers. For four or five years we sat on clear plastic and when I traded the car in, the original fabric seats were absolutely as perfect as the day I bought it. I had never once enjoyed the actual seats.

Furthermore, I felt good about my accomplishment.

In his popular book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Steven Covey tells about "the man who asked another, on the death of a mutual friend, 'How much did he leave?' His friend responded, 'He left it all.'" [p. 99]

And Leonard Sweet, in his witty commentary of this story says that Jesus, in telling the young man to sell and give it all, is merely speeding up the inevitable.

You and I really don't own anything we cannot do without. In fact, there is a sense in which we are in bondage to anything we cannot give away. That is what Jesus saw when he looked at the earnest young man, and that, I believe, is the place where the Gospel of Jesus

**Christ intersects most powerfully with
your life and mine.**

It may seem that what institutional religion is about mostly is asking for money. And, indeed, we do. But to the degree that we ask or give, out of a sense of obligation, or worse, guilt, or worst of all, a sense that if we give God will be pleased with us, we are missing the point altogether. This church needs your support. If you're visiting this morning and a member of another church, that church needs your support. If you are a member of no church, you ought to be supporting whoever is nearest to you and is providing the compassionate and helpful services to needy people which makes life more human.

But none of that is the point, finally. The point of all this is what that young man was looking for - eternal life: life

**now, with the depth, and meaning, and
fullness of eternity about it.**

That's what Jesus Christ came to give. It is a gift. You receive it by opening your hands and asking for it. It is yours as you release your grip on whatever it is you are clasping so tightly and allow God's love, God's forgiveness, God's amazing grace to fill you.

You know from childhood - you and I have been taught to clasp our hands tightly in prayer - close your eyes, bow your head, fold your hands. And there is something about that posture that reflects our mind set: closed off from the world, hands not touching anything to distract; head lowered from the level of normal intercourse with life, a kind of personal spiritual closet. There is a much older custom, I have learned, and that is to be in a receptive posture as you pray, eyes open perhaps, head up, and most of all, hands open. Some left hands in a posture of receiving. Most of us can't bring ourselves to do that. But won't you quietly, simply, relax the muscles in your hands and let them be open, palms slightly up - let go of whatever you are squeezing, holding so tightly, and be ready to receive.

The promise, which Jesus made to his perplexed friends, is that though the demand to give it all away is impossible, with God all things are possible, a little more so, I think, when our hands are open.

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Great God of love, for all your gifts, we thank you. For our resource, be they great or modest, for the love of friends and families, for the common gifts of beauty and kindness and affection, we thank you. Teach us to open our hands to release our grip and to be receptive to the love you have for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.